Netwatch By Jim Carroll

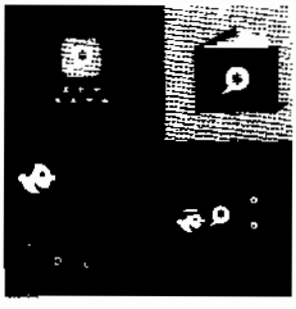
Your guide to business & accounting on the Internet

Digital debris

Have you ever considered all of the digital debris you may be leaving behind? E-mail messages can be retained, redistributed or archived in some distant database; a firey post could end up recirculating in perpetuity. And those videos you posted to YouTube?

Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Years from now, you may discover your electronic record will come to play a role that you could not have imagined.

Wikipedia tells me as of this day, Google has about 450,000 servers, each of which has at least 80 GB of hard disk space. That adds up to a whopping 36,000,000 GB of space, or about 36 petabytes. That is a big, big number.



While Google builds its world index, we archive our lives. In my case, I have an e-mail archive dating from 1982 — yes, 1982 — that includes hundreds of thousands of messages; more than 26,000 digital photos of my family and friends and 300 hours of digitized video of the kids growing up. Multiply that by a few hundred million people and think about all the information that's out there.

Then there is the WayBack machine, an interesting site that lets you look back in time at a huge number of sites — including your own if you ever had one. People don't stop to think that in this technology-heavy world, much of what they do can be automatically captured, recorded, stored and distributed. Although we might not be thinking about the implications, activists such as the US group Electronic Frontier Foundation, with the mission of "defending freedom in the digital world," are definitely looking ahead.

In this country, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada is trying to ensure that technology and surveillance does not infringe on our rights — and that's where the problem can potentially escalate by the minute. We're building a world in which what we do and think can be instantly broadcast into the electronic ether; actions and thoughts previously shared with a group of friends can instantly be flung to a massive audience. Already there are meetings, conferences, classrooms and other public and private spaces that are broadcast into the digital ether. It all goes on the public record and if you aren't thinking about what you are doing, the results can be, well, not great.

Consider the case of the professor in Florida who showed up at class in October last year in what the blogosphere reported as an "obviously stoned condition." His lecture, videotaped and posted online, traveled the world with astonishing speed. In 24 hours, he was out of a job.

Despite rules and laws and efforts with respect to privacy, somehow digital debris can get left behind to become part of your permanent record. As you traverse our increasingly technological world, you might find your information coming back to haunt you.

Lawyers routinely subpoena e-mail records as part of a legal action; corporate lawyers undertake intensive Internet research as a regular part of any due diligence on a deal and human resource recruiters do Google searches to check job applicants' résumés. Then there is the blogosphere, where anyone can instantly take any old piece of information and turn it into the news of the day.

The fact is due diligence has moved into the digital age; everything you do any time in this online world can quickly become a part of your overall identity. Do something that years later won't look very smart and you could come to regret it.

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